
From 'to die a tribe and be born a nation' towards 'culture, the foundation of a nation': the shifting politics and aesthetics of Namibian nationalism

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Abstract

Namibia's postcolonial nationalist imaginary is by no means homogeneous. Overall, however, it is conspicuous that as Namibia celebrates her twenty-fifth anniversary of independence, national identity is no longer defined primarily through the common history of the liberation struggle but through the tolerant accommodation, even wholehearted celebration, of cultural difference. This article attempts to understand the shifting politics and aesthetics of Namibian nationalism from two interconnected angles. On the one hand, it takes a historical perspective; it looks into shifting discourses and practices of nationalism over the past century, starting from the anti-colonial resistance at the turn to the 20th century through to the twenty-fifth anniversary of Namibian independence. On the other hand, the article investigates the cultural redefinition of the bonds between the Namibian people(s), which has been a significant aspect of the constructions of postcolonial Namibian nationhood and citizenship. The argument highlights urban social life and cultural expression and the links between everyday life and political mobilization. It thereby emphasizes the nationalist activism of the developing Black urban culture of the post-World War II era and the internal urban social movements of the 1980s.

Introduction

Namibia's long-deferred independence, when it finally happened, was delayed by a further quarter of an hour. UN Secretary General Perez de Cuelhar was still giving his speech when all across the country church bells rang in the new era at midnight of 21 March 1990. The tens of thousands who had gathered that late summer's night in the Windhoek Athletics Stadium, soon to be renamed Independence Stadium, had to wait another 20 minutes or so before the new nation's flag was raised for the first time to the crowd's cheers. South African President F.W. De Klerk – watched by Nelson Mandela, recently released from prison – was quite alone in saluting his country's flag, hand on heart. The triumphant joy was palpable. Even some cabinet ministers-to-be joined in the resounding "down, down" jeers when the *Vierkleur* was brought down, and the new Namibian flag fluttered in the night wind.

Fig. 1. Uhuru



The cover of the first issue of *The Namibian* in an independent Namibia, Friday 22 March 1990 –the dawn of a new era.

In the morning, the stadium was packed again to capacity for the Independence Concert with Ziggy Marley as its main attraction. Ziggy Marley, never much of a popular star in his own right, had ostensibly been chosen in memory of his late father, Bob Marley, who had played at Zimbabwe's Independence Concert ten years earlier. During intermissions troops of 'traditional dancers' entertained the crowds waiting for the main attractions. This became a common feature of the political and commemorative events across newly-independent Namibia which I attended during my doctoral research on gender and Namibian liberation politics throughout the following two years. Audiences clapped and laughed heartily. The dancers were pre-pubescent girls dressed in SWAPO Pioneers t-shirts and short skirts made of fabric in the SWAPO colours (red, blue and green); much less often they wore the red-and-black striped *ondhelela* material considered 'traditional' in the country's North, or, very occasionally, reed skirts. The young dancers' performances were usually referred to as 'traditional', yet the wild flailing of limbs and hops on all fours had little in common with any one pre-established cultural tradition. Everyone was aware that this was a recently invented 'national' tradition, which had originated in the vast Namibian exile community of the 1970s and 1980s.

Soon after I returned to Namibia in mid-1993 I noticed remarkable changes in the narrative, performance and aesthetics of Namibian nationalism. Starting from the mid-1990s, and rapidly accelerating from the turn of the century, an emerging focus on ethnicized cultural performances appeared to overlay, if not entirely replace, the performance of a unified 'Namibian culture', which dominated commemorations and other political and cultural events in the early years of independent Namibia.

This vignette opens up my discussion on the trajectories of nationalism in Namibia. It starts from the recognition that the processes of nationalism – and state-making once national independence has been achieved – involve a symbolic dimension of creating national imaginaries. This includes the creation of cultural emblems and symbols, as well as the (re)writing of 'national' history. Kelly Askew, who has studied the performance/s of nationhood in Tanzania, proposes further that nations are not only institutional configurations (as nation-states) and subjective beliefs (Anderson's 'imagined communities'), but also palpable performative processes.¹ Elsewhere, I have argued that "performance and its intersection with nationalism and power are not a matter of representation, but of enactment; that is, the nation only becomes real in the moment of the performance."² Events such as national day commemorations and cultural festivals, where national imaginaries are brought to life through performances, are thus of particular significance when one wants to understand nationalism in a specific context.

The Independence celebrations of 21 March 1990, with a pan-African identified key performer and accompanied by playful Namibian trans-ethnic young dancers, signified an iconic unified nationhood, which was held up as the aim of the newly independent country. Namibians, who had under apartheid colonialism been divided on the basis of their allegedly 'separate cultures' and isolated from the wider world, were looking forward

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nations*, London, Verso, 1983; Kelly M. Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002.

² Heike Becker and Carola Lentz, "The Politics and Aesthetics of Commemoration: National Days in Southern Africa", *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 36 (1-2), 2013: 1-10 (5).

to “negotiating the increasingly interconnected world both within and beyond Namibia that opened up to them after independence.”³ The Namibian Constitution, drafted in a liberal tradition, acknowledged every person’s right “to enjoy, practise, profess, maintain and promote any culture, language, tradition or religion” but this was qualified by the document’s preamble, which emphasized “the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Namibian nation”. From the mid-1990s, however, the country’s cultural policies and, by implication, its notion of citizenship, changed in practice, though not on paper: the promotion of cultural heritage and cultural (broadly understood as ethnic) diversity as the basis for Namibian-ness became a significant item on the new nation-state’s agenda, which now emphasized ‘unity-in-diversity’.⁴

So what had happened? And how should we understand these changes? This article attempts to understand the unfolding trajectory from two interconnected angles: on the one hand, it takes a historical perspective by looking into shifting discourses and practices of nationalism over the past century, starting from the anti-colonial resistance at the turn to the 20th century through to the twenty-fifth anniversary of Namibian independence. In so doing, the analysis emphasizes trajectories of continuities and discontinuities, rather than following a neat periodization into the pre-colonial, the colonial and the post-colonial. On the other hand, my argument draws on the connection between the political and cultural constructs of nationalism. I pick up Andre Du Pisani’s critique of the nationalist discourse of the South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO) as privileging one register of anti-colonial nationalism in Namibia, namely a political ‘patriotic’ reading of the most recent liberation struggle, a narrative of resistance and heroism, as a point of identification for the Namibian people in the postcolony. The second register, he argues, has largely been omitted in scholarship on Namibia: this concerns a cultural redefinition of the bonds between the Namibian people(s).⁵

The article aims to point out the profound connections between these two ostensibly incongruent registers of imagining the nation and their entanglements. Through pointing out exemplary points of intersection between nationalism and the social and cultural worlds in which political aspirations have been embedded, I argue that in reality they are closely interconnected and that they, and their entanglements, have continuously shifted over the past century.

The emergence of Namibian nationalism

But first I will set out the theme of ‘unity’, which has been at the core of Namibian nationhood discourses for the past century. This is a political and historical narrative that starts with recounting the partial co-operation and solidarity of different populations in the resistance against German colonialism at the beginning of the 20th century, a precursor to modern nationalism. Modern nationalism ostensibly emerged with new forms of political organization under South African colonialism, and from about 1960

³ Wendi A. Haugh, *Lyrical Nationalism in Post-apartheid Namibia: Kings, Christians, and Cosmopolitans in Catholic Youth Songs*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2014: 222.

⁴ Heike Becker, “Commemorating Heroes in Windhoek and Eenhana: Memory, Culture and Nationalism in Namibia, 1990–2010”, *Africa*, 81 (4), 2011: 519–543.

⁵ Andre du Pisani, “The Discursive Limits of SWAPO’s Dominant Discourses on Anti-Colonial Nationalism in Postcolonial Namibia – A First Exploration”, in: André du Pisani, Reinhart Koessler and William A. Lindeke, (eds.), *The Long Aftermath of War: Reconciliation and Transition in Namibia*, Freiburg i. Br., Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institut, 2010, 1–40 (16).

came of age in the nationalist struggle, with its emphasis on political symbols and political rituals shared by all Namibians due to their common history.

The contours of this history are well-known; the story has been told many times in SWAPO publications, as well as by scholars interested in nationalism in Namibia.⁶ My narrative will focus rather on a little known dimension of the emergence of Namibian nationalism: its links with urban life and expectations of modernity, particularly among younger, well-educated people in Windhoek's Old Location. I access this perspective through the reading of a short-lived alternative newspaper, the *South West News / Suidwes Nuus*, which was published in 1960. I then recount the ambivalent responses of residents of the then South West Africa to the blueprint for grand apartheid, again shifting the focus to the rather less well-known moment of internal resistance by urban-based social movements of the 1980s.

Enter the narrative of unity: early anti-colonial resistance

Samuel Maharero and Hendrik Witbooi are often portrayed as the first leaders who brought people from different polities together in what is today Namibia, epitomized in Maharero's appeal to Witbooi to join in the uprising in early 1904. The Herero leader addressed the Nama *kaptein* as "my brother", urging him "to make your voice heard so that all Africa may take up arms against the Germans."⁷ Of course, Maharero's letter was intercepted by the Germans and the Herero's armed resistance received no support from other polities in the territory. However, after learning about the brutal destruction of the Herero that followed their defeat in battle, various Nama groups united under Witbooi and engaged the Germans in guerilla skirmishes until the death in battle of Hendrik Witbooi in October 1905. In the deep South, guerrillas under Jacob Marenga held out until 1907. Marenga, being of mixed Nama-Herero parentage, has been celebrated in nationalist historiography as an embodiment of trans-ethnic unity, and a leader of both Nama and Herero among his followers.⁸ The war of resistance ended in crushing defeat, its sinister sequel being the genocide of the Herero and Nama, who died in their tens of thousands. Many were driven into the waterless Omaheke, while others were starved and overworked in the concentration camps where 45% of all Nama and Herero died in captivity. These numbers do not include those who had died in battle or perished following von Trotha's infamous extermination order.

When German colonialism ended in 1915 with the South African takeover, the change of administrations provided a brief window of opportunity for the colonized to desert the unbearable conditions of forced labour, very much to the abhorrence of the German and the incoming White South African settlers. The Black population's hopes for reform were, however, soon crushed. The first to suffer defeat were the Kwanyama in the territory's far north, under King Mandume Ya Ndemufajo, whose settlement area had been split by the 1884 Berlin conference between what is today Namibia and Angola. Yet as the narrative of nationalist historiography has it, the early 1920s was a watershed moment, not only in

⁶ E.g., SWAPO of Namibia, *To Be Born a Nation: The Liberation Struggle for Namibia*, Luanda and London, Zed Press, for Department of Information and Publicity, SWAPO of Namibia, 1981; Tony Emmett, *Popular Resistance and the Roots of Nationalism in Namibia, 1915–1966*, Basel, Schlettwein, 1999; Peter H. Katjavivi, *A History of Resistance in Namibia*, Paris, UNESCO, 1988; Haugh, *Lyrical Nationalism*.

⁷ Katjavivi, *Resistance*: 9.

⁸ SWAPO of Namibia, *To Be Born a Nation*.

terms of the re-tightening of colonial rule, but also in the build-up of resistance to it. Tony Emmett's seminal study of popular resistance and nationalism under South African rule tells of this, starting from the 1922 revolt of the Bondelswarts in the deep South who were bombed into defeat. About 100 members of the small community lost their lives. Rehoboth, south of Windhoek, was another site of resistance in 1925, but the people there were crushed with airplanes circling above the settlement.⁹

Major resistance occurred in rural areas during the early period of South African rule. However, there was another form of resistance which SWAPO's patriotic history¹⁰ does not even mention: in the 1920s the small permanent Black workforces in the towns began to stir, developing new forms of political organization. This early urban resistance and nascent nationalism has received little attention in the patriotic narrative or in the historiography of Namibian nationalism more generally. Katjavivi refers to these labour-based protests in a single paragraph.¹¹ Only Emmett's chronicle, originally written as a PhD dissertation at Wits University in the mid-1980s – when the then dominant Marxism in South African history, sociology and anthropology departments put working-class struggles first – details the trajectories of these new forms of organization. He also depicts their alienation from the majority of the urban population in a rather critical fashion, since they were, like the Lüderitz branch of Clements Kadalie's Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) launched in 1920, initiatives of mostly expatriate "elite urban groups."¹² The administration ultimately succeeded in preventing the organization's spread from the educated expatriate class to the local population, particularly the Owambo migrant labourers who made up a significant part of the labour force.¹³

Somewhat more attention is paid in the nationalist narrative to the Garveyist Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), another movement which originated in Lüderitz during the early 1920s. As historians of Namibia have pointed out, while UNIA was initially also dominated by relatively well-off, foreign men (mostly West Africans), it attracted local members from various populations in the Police Zone, especially Herero and Damara leaders, but also some Nama. It even spread as far north as Uukwambi in Owambo.¹⁴ Garveyism penetrated rural and small town Namibia where it became associated with millenarianism, creating a defiant expectancy based on the belief that help would come from the 'Americans'.¹⁵

Although the association quickly declined from its peak in 1923, as the expected 'Americans' did not arrive, it represented a new form of national, trans-ethnic organization which was able to reach out to the small permanent urban population as well as to some of the migrant labourers from northern Namibia. UNIA leaders emphasized the need for unity across ethnic lines. Aaron Mungunda, brother to Hosea Kutako, speaking at a meeting at Usakos urged "the black men to pull together and to unite as one

⁹ Emmett, *Resistance*: 89-154.

¹⁰ SWAPO of Namibia, *To Be Born a Nation*.

¹¹ Katjavivi, *Resistance*: 19.

¹² Emmett, *Resistance*: 128.

¹³ *Ibid.*: 133.

¹⁴ Marion Wallace with John Kinnahan, *A History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990*, Sunnyside, Jacana, 2011: 226f.

¹⁵ Emmett, *Resistance*: 147.

and then they will get their liberty as this is their land.”¹⁶ The Owambo migrant labourers’ experience has been often regarded as central to the growth of nationalist sentiment in Namibia.¹⁷ What has been omitted from the mainstream nationalist narration, however, is the well-documented tendency of southern African labour migrants to develop a strong sense of ethnic identity, which allowed them to tap into ethnic networks for support.¹⁸ Haugh claims that in Namibia labour migrants also developed a sense of themselves as ‘Owambo’, but the obvious project of the apartheid regime led to the prompt abandonment of ethnicity and their embrace of nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s by regrouping the initially ethnic-based Owambo organizations into SWAPO.¹⁹

Expectations of modernity: Old Location and nationalism

Less recognized than the unity discourse of organized political nationalism and its roots in anticolonial resistance and migrant labour is the role played by the developing Black urban culture of the post-World War II era. Little is known about urban social life and cultural expression, and the links between everyday life and political mobilization. This is largely due to the nationalist histories told and retold by the liberation movement-turned-ruling party, as much as the dominant academic historiography of Namibia, something Dag Henrichsen points out in the introduction to the facsimile reprint of the *Southwest News / Suidwes Nuus* (SWN), a short-lived alternative newspaper, published in nine editions in Windhoek in 1960: “The nationalist historiography, with its almost exclusive focus on national political mobilization, resistance and state coercion, is silent on crucial social experiences and expectations of Africans.”²⁰

SWN was the first Namibian newspaper that was published by Africans. It was an initiative of a group of young men living in Windhoek’s Old Location township who were activists of SWAPA (the South West Africa Progressive Association), an organisation that has been described as a “cultural body with a political flavor.”²¹ Some had ties with the Herero Chiefs Council, which at the time led the petitioning campaign at the United Nations, most prominently in the person of Zedekia Ngavirue, and the then newly-formed SWANU, the first ‘modern’ African political party. Emil Appollus, who edited the first edition of SWN before he fled into exile, was a member of SWAPO. Ngavirue and Appollus had studied in South Africa where they had become involved with ANC politics. Together with other young urbanites, including students at South African universities, they formed an incipient Namibian intelligentsia and a new generation of political activists.

The first edition of the newspaper was published in March 1960, a few months after the 10 December shootings of anti-forced removal protesters. The paper followed closely developments in the location as well as the enquiry into the shootings. It reported overtly political issues from a nationalist perspective. It was, however, not merely a political paper, produced by a small group of political activists. Henrichsen points out that it was

¹⁶ Ibid.: 146.

¹⁷ Haugh, *Lyrical Nationalism*: 10.

¹⁸ Terence Ranger, “Missionaries, Migrants, and the Manyika: The Invention of Ethnicity in Zimbabwe”, in: LeRoy Vail, (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, London, Currey, 1989: 118-146.

¹⁹ Haugh *Lyrical Nationalism* : 9.

²⁰ Dag Henrichsen, “A Glance at our Africa: The History and Contents of South West News”, in: idem, (ed.), *A Glance At Our Africa: Facsimile Reprint of South West News Suidwes Nuus 1960*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 1997: 13-44 (14).

²¹ Katjavivi, *Resistance*: 30.

also concerned with the everyday life of Africans, thus speaking to, and about, the social and cultural worlds in which the political activism was rooted.²²

Social life in the Old Location was enormously diverse, as were its residents who hailed from all sections of the Black Namibian population, and also included a number of people from neighbouring countries and from as far away as Nigeria. The people of the Old Location were highly diverse socially in terms of aspirations to education, consumption, and cultural and leisure styles.²³ The SWN characteristically carried stories on topics ranging from so-called traditional Herero dances, which appealed to a set of the Old Location's residents who were inclined towards rural and ethnically-defined identifications, to topics such as education and scholarships, beauty contests, and modern dancing events, stories that attracted interest from aspiring urban elites.

Popular cultural practices and performance, including new forms of language and humour, sports clubs, jive music, beauty contests, etc. were part of an urban modernity that emerged across the African continent in the aftermath of World War II. The post-war African modernity was marked by expectations of a bright future and embraced a distinctive cultural repertoire, including items such as radios, movies, telephones, cars, fashionable clothes and cigarettes. Such was the socio-cultural context of the political aspirations of anti-colonial struggles and the nationalist project.²⁴ In Namibia as elsewhere in Africa, the urban population which created this popular culture was central to the foundation of the first African political parties and the propagation of a mass nationalist movement. Alas, while most of the continent gained independence in the early 1960s, in Namibia African social and political aspirations were brutally crushed by the apartheid regime through forced removals and the destruction of vibrant urban neighbourhoods, as well as the persecution of anti-apartheid activists, many of whom then left for exile. The destruction of Windhoek's Old Location is a significant part of this history which curbed an almost forgotten strand of nationalist resistance.²⁵

'To die a tribe and be born a nation': nationalism in the apartheid era

The ideology and politics of apartheid separated people according to race. This is well-known. The population of Windhoek's Old Location was removed from the locale close to the centre of town and some White suburbs. Its African residents were forced to live in the new township Katutura, while their Coloured neighbours were taken to another segregated new township, Khomasdal. What is less well known is that in Katutura the residents were separated further according to ethnicity.

The manifestations of urban spatial apartheid were a consequence of the politics of 'separate development'. Namibia under South African occupation was ruled in line with the apartheid vision. From the 1960s onwards, the Odendaal Commission's recommendations had been implemented in the territory of South West Africa, resulting

²² Henrichsen, "Glance": 23.

²³ Milly Jafta, Nicky Kautja, Magda Oliphant Dawn Ridhway, Kapofi Shipingana, Ussiel Tjienda, Gerson Veii, et al., *An Investigation of the Shooting at the Old Location on 10 December 1959*, Windhoek, Namibian History Trust, 1999.

²⁴ Heike Becker, "Popular Culture, Anthropological Perspectives on", in: *Wiley International Encyclopaedia of Anthropology*, 2015 (forthcoming).

²⁵ Characteristically, when the Namibian Independence Museum opened in 2014, the inclusion of an exhibition on the Old Location and its struggle against forced removal was remembered only at the last minute. When I visited the museum in January 2015, a few photographs had been hung on the top floor, with no explanatory captions or accompanying text.

in the carving out of ethnically based homelands, particularly in the northern parts of the country. In line with apartheid ideology they were to 'develop' separately into autonomous 'nations'. Each of these presumed proto-nations was provided with an ethno-nationalist imaginary, complete with its own administration, flag, parliamentary mace, and explicit attempts at politicizing ethnic difference into nationhood. A key component of this blueprint was the promotion of ethnically bounded 'cultures'.

Unsurprisingly, pre-independence nationalist rhetoric emphasized that the liberation struggle was the birthplace of a new nation which would do away with these ethno-cultural divisions. SWAPO's quasi-official history *To Be Born a Nation: The Liberation Struggle for Namibia* appropriated its title from a saying of the Mozambican liberation struggle, which articulated that the aim was "to die a tribe and be born a nation."²⁶

Tribalism and regionalism were regarded as major nemeses of national liberation, rooted in the idea of 'culture' as "talking about invaluable things aimed at separating people."²⁷ This view was entirely justified: in Namibia as in South Africa, 'culture' was a key concept in the state's discourse of apartheid social engineering. In the early 1960s, 'race' was already being increasingly replaced by 'culture' as the keyword of apartheid segregation.²⁸

While the apartheid 'homelands' remained bent on ethnicity, coded as 'culture', in urban settings it was gradually de-emphasized. In Windhoek, for instance, the mid-1980s extension of Katutura township included the significantly named multi-ethnic Wanaheda section (*Wa-mbo, Na-ma, He-rero, Da-mara*). In 1979 the legal requirement for separate residential areas had ended with the promulgation of the Abolishment of Racial Discrimination (Urban Residential Areas and Public Amenities) Act 3 of 1979.

Social occasions, which had been greatly restricted following the forced removal of Black Windhoekers to the apartheid townships, were slowly revitalized. From the 1970s onwards, night clubs and soccer tournaments provided increasing opportunities, especially for young urbanites, to meet across the fissions of ethnicity.²⁹

The urban population which crossed ethnic boundaries remained small but became significant for an emerging new layer of activists who, in the mid-1980s, founded social movements and community-based organizations (CBOs). The activism of students, workers, women and township resident associations became momentous in the internal anti-apartheid struggle, much to the irritation of SWAPO, which was suspicious of any efforts beyond its control.³⁰ The activists of the new urban movements – like those of the Old Location – had often studied in South Africa and brought back ideas and practices of anti-apartheid activism, along with South African tastes in popular music, as well as the

²⁶ SWAPO, *To Be Born a Nation*: ii.

²⁷ Denis Nandi, New Era, 27 January – 2 February, 1994; cited in Ian Fairweather, *Identity Politics and the Heritage Industry in Post-apartheid Northern Namibia*, unpubl. PhD, University of Manchester, 2001: 137.

²⁸ Emile Boonzaier, "'Race' and the Race Paradigm", in: Emile Boonzaier and John Sharp, (eds.), *South African Keywords: The Uses and Abuses of Political Concepts*, Cape Town, Philip, 1988: 58-78 (65).

²⁹ Seth Eixab, "Mein ganzes Elend", in: Henning Melber, (ed.), *Katutura: Alltag im Ghetto*, Bonn, Informationsstelle Südliches Afrika, 1988: 71-101.

³⁰ Heike Becker, *Namibian Women's Movement, 1980 to 1992: From Anti-colonial Resistance to Reconstruction*, Frankfurt, IKO – Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1995: 171-226.

alternative sartorial, artistic and literary styles of South African oppositional politics.³¹ The boundary-crossing desires of the young anti-apartheid activists broke down the barriers that prevented people from creating networks among Namibians of different social and cultural backgrounds, as well as in the transnational entanglements of southern African social movement politics and popular culture.

Yet this cosmopolitan nationalism remained confined to urban settings, particularly in Windhoek. Up until 1990, various factors contributed to a situation where the different parts of the country and their residents were isolated from each other. These included restrictions on movement and settlement, and administrative measures, for example, the placement of educational institutions under ethnic administrations. In some parts of the country, particularly the northern areas of Owambo and Kavango, the cultural festivals that were enforced through the schools and South African-sponsored regional ethno-cultural organizations, such as *Ezuva* and *Etango*, all emphasized the distinctiveness of 'cultures'.

Independence and beyond: the culturalization of Namibian nationalism

In 1990, SWAPO's fervent antitribalist discourse – notwithstanding the long-standing, albeit obscured ethnicization of SWAPO politics itself³² – and the sophisticated boundary crossers among the small but vocal groups of urban activists converged in the cosmopolitan Independence Day concert performances I described in the opening vignette.

Having emerged from the nationalist struggle against the colonial apartheid state, the post-colonial Namibian state was initially wary of the discourse of 'culture', as it denoted division. In 1990 most SWAPO politicians, as well as the small circles of Namibian intellectuals such as the activists with whom I worked in the course of my doctoral research in the early 1990s, shunned the notion of 'cultures' as distinctive ways of life of different 'peoples'.³³ Fairly soon, however, the discourses of culture and nationalism began to change. Among the first signs of this in the early 1990s were attempts by sections of several ethnic groups to re-establish kings and kingdoms, which made front-page news in the Namibian press.³⁴

SWAPO³⁵ politicians were divided as to how to address these unexpected developments. Some continued to emphasize that the Namibian constitution "was designed to achieve not a sectional, not a tribal, not a regional and not a provincial, but a national programme."³⁶ Others, among them then Prime Minister Hage Geingob, presented a

³¹ It was a striking recognition during my early 1990s fieldwork with activists from the broad spectrum of CBOs that the internal, urban Namibian opposition to South African rule was as heavily influenced by South African political and cultural styles as was the apartheid colonial dispensation itself. See also Colin Leys and Susan Brown, *Histories of Namibia: Living through the Liberation Struggle. Life Histories Told to Colin Leys and Susan Brown*, London, Merlin, 2005.

³² Lauren Dobell, SWAPO's *Struggle for Namibia: War by Other Means*, Basel, Schlettwein, 1998: 89.

³³ Becker, "Heroes": 537.

³⁴ Andrew Murray, "Conceptualising Ethnicity, Nation-Building and Democracy in Namibia", in: *Namibian Views: Ethnicity, Nation-Building and Democracy*, Windhoek, Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung in cooperation with the Namibia Institute for Democracy, 1993: 17-21 (17).

³⁵ After independence SWAPO renamed itself 'Swapo Party'. I thus refer SWAPO (in uppercase) in relation to the pre-independence period but use Swapo party when referring to the post-colonial era.

³⁶ Mose P. Tjitendero, "Factors in the Historic Heritage of Namibia that Encourage or Impede the Development of Democracy", in: *Namibian Views: Ethnicity, Nation-Building and Democracy*, Windhoek, Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung in cooperation with the Namibia Institute for Democracy, 1993: 57-60 (58f.).

different point of departure. Before discussing issues of ethnicity, nation building, and democracy, Geingob suggested, we first of all need to “recognize certain facts”, namely “that Namibia is a multicultural, multi-ethnic nation.”³⁷

Thus, just a few years into independence the global discourses of multiculturalism and citizenship – this marked feature of the post cold war era of globalization – arrived in Namibia. Chants of ‘One Namibia – One Nation’ continued to resound at political rallies and commemorations. Gradually, however, the notion of a national Namibian culture forged supposedly through the nation’s joint struggle against oppression and colonialism was overlaid, if not entirely replaced by, a new principle of ‘unity in diversity’, a rendition whereby the Namibian nation is epitomized through different cultures, each one distinct, but all harmoniously coexisting.³⁸ The Namibian government’s modified national cultures approach has been compared to the South African ‘rainbow nation’ idea. It is seen by some as a vision that replaced the ‘One Namibia – One Nation’ national culture approach because it is better able to accommodate the wide range of ethnic identifications in the country, and particularly the claims of traditional authorities for recognition, the (re)invention of traditions and the promotion of cultural heritage.³⁹

Performing ‘unity in diversity’: Proud to be Namibian pageant

The post-colonial Namibian state and institutions of public culture have increasingly celebrated cultural difference as the essence of post-apartheid nationalism. The national cultural festivals which have been held annually since 1995 are perhaps the best-known example of the celebration of ‘unity in diversity’. State-sponsored, thoroughly bureaucratically-organized festivals take place across Namibia’s 13 administrative regions during which ‘cultural groups’ compete by performing ethnic songs and dances at local (‘circuit’), regional and national levels.⁴⁰ It is however not only the national government that promotes this approach. Local government, higher education institutions and various other players from Namibian society also sponsor events that acclaim cultural diversity and culture as the foundation of the nation.⁴¹

A fitting example is the /Ae//Gams Arts & Cultural Festival – named after the precolonial Nama idiom for the Windhoek area – that has been organized by the Windhoek municipality since 2001, with sponsorship from corporate and international donors to celebrate (our) ‘diverse cultures – one vision’. As spelt out by politicians on various occasions, the festival’s aims include, firstly, the celebration of pride in the country’s different cultures and its multicultural character, which, according to then President Pohamba during the opening of the 2007 festival, is considered to be “part of our national identity”.⁴² Secondly, the festival is an integral part of strategies to develop cultural

³⁷ Hage G. Geingob, “Address of the Right Honourable Hage G. Geingob, Prime Minister of the Republic of Namibia on the Occasion of the Opening of the Conference on ‘Ethnicity, Nation Building and Democracy in Namibia’, in: *Namibian Views: ethnicity, nation-building and democracy*, Windhoek, Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung in cooperation with the Namibia Institute for Democracy, 1993: 13-16 (13).

³⁸ Becker, “Heroes”: 537f.

³⁹ Michael U. Akuupa and Godwin Kornes, “From ‘One Namibia, One Nation’ towards ‘Unity in Diversity’? Shifting Representations of Culture and Nationhood in Namibian Independence Day Celebrations, 1990–2010”, *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 36 (1-2), 2013: 34-46 (44f.).

⁴⁰ Michael U. Akuupa, “The Formation of ‘National Culture’ in Post-Apartheid Namibia: A Focus on State-Sponsored Cultural Festivals in Kavango Region”, unpubl. PhD, University of the Western Cape, 2012.

⁴¹ Phrased officially in Afrikaans: *Kultuur: die fondasie van ‘n nasie*, “Culture: the foundation of a nation” was the motto of the 2008 /Ae//Gams Arts & Cultural Festival.

⁴² *The Namibian*, “Respect each other’s cultures”, 21 September 2007 (Staff Reporter).

tourism, which is regarded as the key component of a thriving tourist economy in the 21st century.

In 2008 I witnessed the seventh /Ae/Gams Festival. Following the official opening with speeches by then Prime Minister Nahas Angula and local dignitaries and interspersed with performances by Indonesian and Chinese dancers, the festival's line-up demonstrated the astounding range of contemporary cultural forms and aesthetic expressions employed in postcolonial Namibia to mediate 'unity in diversity'. The three-day event in Windhoek's city centre and in Katutura included performances by a variety of ethnic 'cultural groups'⁴³, church choirs and longstanding cultural performers of the Namibian scene, as well as icons of the recently emerged Namibian popular music scene, who creatively re-interpret rap and the South African *kwaito* music styles, with lyrics in Namibian languages.

A particularly intriguing item on the festival programme was the 'Proud to be Namibian' pageant whereby female and male contestants paraded their cultural attire to the audience's animated acclaim. The contenders, drawn mainly from the various cultural groups that performed during the festival, donned their finest ethnic garb for the occasion. The judges, who were drawn from the faculty of local academic and performing institutions, expressly looked for 'authenticity' in the sense of the embodied presentation of pure, pristine, untouched ethnic cultural heritage. The idea was defined in no uncertain terms: proud Namibians are considered those who present profound ethnic identifications.

Conclusion

Namibia's postcolonial nationalist imaginary is by no means homogeneous – one needs only to visit the North Korean-built Namibian Independence Museum, which opened in Windhoek in 2014, to see that. The museum's exhibitions tell the patriotic history of the nationalist liberation struggle in an almost exaggerated narrative. Overall, however, it is conspicuous that as Namibia celebrates her twenty-fifth anniversary of independence, national identity is no longer defined primarily through the common history of the liberation struggle but through the tolerant accommodation, even wholehearted celebration, of cultural difference. The ethnographic window into the /Ae//Gams Festival confirms Enid Schildkrout's observation: in postcolonial Namibia, ethnic cultural symbols and practices, including those deemed indigenous as well as those that had originated in the colonial encounter, were redefined as "apolitical signs of egalitarian multiculturalism".⁴⁴

Despite apparent similarities with apartheid era phenomena, the emphases on cultural differences should by no means be regarded as residues of the past. Rather, the "pragmatics of (cultural) difference" as a defining feature of the post-apartheid political dispensation, as John and Jean Comaroff have shown in respect of South Africa, is due to the convergence of the liberation from apartheid and the opening of southern Africa to

⁴³ In the contemporary Namibian context 'cultural groups' refers to teams of performers of 'traditional', ethnic-based song and dance. In the following, it is used without inverted commas.

⁴⁴ Enid Schildkrout, "Museums and Nationalism in Namibia", *Museum Anthropology*, 19(2), 1995: 65-77 (66).

economic and political neoliberalism.⁴⁵ Their analysis of postcolonial citizenship as at once transcending and tolerating diversity, but caught between ‘Euromodernist’ universalism and cultural relativism, appears apt too for understanding contemporary Namibian conceptions of nationhood. Here, as in South Africa, culture “has come to provide the language of difference.”⁴⁶ This is no peculiarity of the ex-apartheid countries of southern Africa. Similar observations of cultural diversity as a key aspect of imagining the nation in the contemporary era have been made regarding numerous African countries, and indeed the world at large.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, “Reflections on Liberalism, Policulturalism & ID-ology: Citizenship and Difference in South Africa”, in: Steven L. Robins, (ed.), *Limits to Liberation after Apartheid: Citizenship, Governance and Culture*, Oxford, Currey, 2005: 33-56 (34).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ E.g., Peter Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2009.

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